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ABSTRACT

This paper was presented at the annual meeting of the American Educational Research Association as part of a symposium, "A social learning alternative to structural theories for explaining developmental changes in childrens behavior." This presentation examines the moral development of a child in terms of a social learning approach, and discusses some educational implications of this approach. (Author/YRJ)

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# A Social Learning Explanation of Moral Development

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A paper presented at the annual meeting of the American Educational Research Association as part of a symposium, "A social learning alternative to structural theories for explaining developmental changes in children's behavior."

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There are some psychologists and educators who have unilaterally dismissed a cognitive social learning explanation for the development of children's moral judgmental standards and moral conduct. It is this author's belief that the dismissal of social learning theory as a viable explanation for moral development stems largely from some misunderstandings regarding the social learning approach. Thus, the purpose of the present paper will be to explain what social learning theory is and isn't; provide empirical support for social learning arguments; and discuss the educational implications of a social learning approach to moral development.

Social learning theorists view moral judgmental standards and moral acts as instances of rule-governed behaviors which children acquire through observing the judgmental responses of live and symbolic models and through direct interactions with a diverse array of socialization agents within their culture. This socialization process becomes very complex when one considers the multitude of influencial models and socialization agents which a child is exposed to throughout development. Not

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only is a child exposed to parental judgmental standards but also to standards displayed by extrafamilial adults, peers, and by models presented in symbolic forms (Bandura, 1968). Thus, from a social learning perspective the child is not construed as a "black box" which passively reacts to experiential events. On the contrary, the child is conceived as an information processor which transforms, recombines, and decides which of a number of judgmental or behavioral alternatives will serve the child best in varying circumstances (Mischel, 1973). Moreover, socially mediated information, and not transforming psychological structures, are identified as the causal factors in moral development.

The common misunderstandings surrounding the social learning approach can be grouped into two general categories: (1) social learning is concerned with the process whereby children's moral behaviors are shaped through differential reinforcement and (2) social learning portrays children as mere mimics of socialization agents in their culture. Both of the above statements distort the social learning position which, once again, views children as information processors who abstract an array of rules for guiding moral judgments and behaviors. If social learning views children as acquiring complex sets of rules during the course of development, how did the aforementioned misunderstandings originate?

The notion that social learning theorists simply concern themselves with the shaping of verbal and social behaviors is a misnomer that partly stems from the Bandura and McDonald (1963) paper which was unfortunately titled, Influence of Social Reinforcement and the Behavior of Models in Shaping Young Children's Moral Judgments." The title of this

widely cited paper implied that social learning theorists were concerned with shaping of judgmental responses by socialization agents. In actuality, the purpose of this study was to demonstrate the limitations of radical behavioristic points of view in general and in explaining the development of abstract judgmental responses in particular. The limitations of the operant model were nicely illustrated as those children who were not exposed to any models but were differentially reinforced for moral responses that ran counter to their pretested moral orientations did not alter their decision-making criteria. This was the first of several studies in which Bandura and his associates (Bandura, 1965; Bandura & Jeffrey, 1973; Bandura, Jeffrey & Bachia, 1974) clearly demonstrated the limitations of psychological models which limit the role of cognitive factors in the behavior of children and adults.

Aside from demonstrating the limitations of an operant approach another purpose of the Bandura and McDonald (1963) paper was to demonstrate that an abstract rule, intentionality, demonstrated in a wide array of modeled responses could be transmitted through modeling processes. Prior to this investigation modeling studies employed paradigms in which a model performed a specific set of responses and observers were tested for copying the modeled behavior. This study provided the first piece of evidence that young children could respond in a manner consistent with a model's decision making criteria even though the children had never witnessed the model's behavior in the novel settings. These results were replicated by a group of cognitive-developmental psychologists (Cowan, Langer, Heavenrich, Nathanson, 1969) with children from a different locale and socioeconomic status group. Since the Bandura and

McDonald (1963) study a flurry of papers (Brody & Henderson, in press; Dorr & Fry, 1974; Keasy, 1969; Lefurgy & Woloshin, 1969; Prentice, 1972; Schliefer & Douglas, 1973; Tracy & Cross, 1973) have extended our knowledge base regarding the abstraction of judgmental criteria from modeled examples and have indicated that the results are robust for several weeks after a child's initial exposure to the modeled display.

With regard to the issue of children becoming mere mimics of socialization agents, there appears to be some confusion between internalization and social learning notions of moral development. From an internalization view point, children incorporate in total their parent's moral standards. This view presents a rather narrow conception of the scope of social learning influences as children do not merely mimic the judgments of socialization agents, rather, social influences serve as sources of information from which generative rules are abstracted. Children do not simply mimic any one socialization agent, instead, the child constructs rules which are amalgamations of information inputs from several different sources. Thus, the quantity of decision-making criteria which a child develops is a function of the information provided for the child by a large variety of sources in the child's mileu. Therefore, the judgmental criteria which a child brings to bear on a moral issue is the direct result of the type and quality of information that the child has been exposed to throughout development, rather than to inadequacies in the child's moral logic. To illustrate this important point Ron Henderson and I (Brody and Henderson, in press) exposed six year old children to adult and peer models whose moral judgmental criteria were either consistent or conflicting between one another or were inconsistent so that the

models employed intentionality criteria on some occasions and material damage criteria on other occasions. The investigation thus offered a parametric examination of the effects of conflict between models and inconsistency within models when adult and peer multiple-models were the conveyors of information. In addition, half of the subjects within each of these conditions received a rationale which accompanied the judgments rendered by the models. By employing conflicting and inconsistent models an attempt was made to closely approximate the socialization process as it exists in the natural environment. We hypothesized that all the children would adopt a generative rule structure which would contain an admixture of both the intentionality and material damage governed rules. It was expected that the admixtures might differ in the degree to which one moral orientation might be employed, yet few of the subjects were expected to employ one set of judgmental rules exclusively. As predicted, all of the subjects utilized both types of judgmental criteria but the number of intentionality judgments used was related to the substance and quality of information contained in the modeled displays. For example, when children observed adult and peer models who rendered their judgments in an inconsistent fashion and they provided a rationale which accompanied their modeled judgments, the children employed more intentionality judgments than children who represented the age group's developmental level. Likewise, children who were exposed to judgments based exclusively on intentionality criteria only increased their use of the intentionality criteria beyond their pre-experimental levels if the modeled judgments were accompanied by a rationale. Also of interest was the finding that when there was conflict between the peer and adult

model the children apparently selectively attended to the adult model and abstracted and performed his criteria when the child was asked to respond to novel situations. Thus, the content and quality as well as the source of information determined the mix of intentionality and material damage judgmental rules. The children did not demonstrate any lack of moral maturity which one might have ascribed to them had one only looked at the means for those groups who experienced conflicting and inconsistent models who were not provided with any rationales accompanying their modeled judgments. Interestingly, those groups responded in a similar fashion to children who served as a measure of this age group's developmental level.

I would now like to continue our discussion concerning what is and isn't the social learning approach to moral development by focusing on some assumptions put forth by cognitive-developmental psychologists. Two assumptions by cognitive developmentalists which are at odds with a social learning approach are the issues of stages of qualitatively different types of moral thought and the notion of an invariant sequence of more mature forms of moral thought. According to cognitive-developmental theorists (Kohlberg, 1968; Piaget, 1932) a child's moral decision making develops through a series of stages. Each stage represents a qualitatively different mode of moral thought which is considered more mature or more highly developed than the stage which preceeded it and less mature than the stage it preceeds. In addition, moral decision-making is bound by the limitations of a child's moral reasoning level, as a child who has been classified at Kohlberg's stage 3 is expected to

render moral judgments predominately at that stage irrespective of contextual factors.

Instead of arguing that an organization of moral structures sets limits on the types of decision making criteria which children bring to bear on judgmental problems, a social learning approach would expect children to respond in accordance with the situation they were asked to judge. Therefore, a social learning approach argues that children have different moral generative rules that they can bring to bear on judgmental situations. Thus, children as well as adults carry with them different sets of judgmental criteria that they select from depending upon the situation they are required to judge. As a child develops and gains an appreciation for abstract concepts, such as justice, his or her judgmental choices will expand and exhibit increased flexibility.

There are several pieces of information which lend support to the notion that children and adults have at their disposal different judgmental criteria. For example, in a recent study by Levine (1976) adolescents answered three versions of Kohlberg's moral judgment questionnaire. One version had the subjects responding to dilemmas which implicated strangers, while the other two versions implicated respondent's best friends or mothers. A comparison of the treatment conditions revealed that Stage 3 level responses significantly increased when judgments were made regarding the dilemmas of best friends and mothers while Stage 4 responses increased when the judgments implicated strangers. Thus, adolescents used judgmental criteria which demonstrated their obligation to the larger society when they were judging strangers and used a different set of criteria which emphasized interpersonal expectations when they judged their mothers and

friends. Yussen (1976) found similar results with young adolescents when he asked them to respond to moral dilemmas as they thought a policeman and philospher would. The adolescents rendered higher judgmental responses when they responded as they thought a philosopher might. The aforementioned results are not unexpected as Kohlberg (1969), reports on the average, less than fifty percent of a subject's moral judgments fit a single stage, the remainder being normally distributed above and below the modal stage. Given that half of a child's judgmental responses vary at the different moral judgmental levels one must begin to question whether the notion of unitary stages which progress in an invariant sequence accurately reflects the development of moral thought and action. For example, Hann, Smith, and Block (1968) attempted to identify the moral developmental levels of students who participated in student unrest at Berkeley in the late 1960's. During the course of identifying the moral judgmental stages of the students, several hundred had to be excluded from the sample because at least fifty percent of their responses could not be classified at one of Kohlberg's six stages.

Perhaps it is now time to recognize that moral judgments like other cognitive and social measures are subject to a competence-performance dichotomy. In other words, with the type of instruments we currently have at our disposal it is not possible to assess whether children are utilizing their highest form of moral thought (Mischel and Mischel, 1976). It may very well be that young children are capable of mature forms of moral thought, but they simply are unaware that such responses are valued. Given the variability of children's moral responses coupled with recent evidence that even preschool children are capable of employing

sophisticated intentionality criteria in their moral decision making (Chandler, Greenspan, & Barenboim, 1973; Costanzo, Coie, Frume, & Farnill, 1973; Gutkin, 1972) one could argue that children's moral orientations reflect limitations in measurement procedures rather than in reasoning capabilities.

Now I would like to turn my attention to the educational implications of a social learning approach to moral development. However, before I discuss the social learning approach I should point out that cognitive-developmental psychologists have been very instrumental in arguing that schools can make an important contribution to moral development. The concern of cognitive developmentalists has been to develop strategies that allow classroom teachers to increase their student's levels of moral reasoning (Kohlberg and Mayer, 1972). In order to accomplish this task, it is suggested that teacher's identify the moral stage at which their pupils are functioning. Following this initial identification process, the teacher's task is to induce some degree of disequilibrium by exposing students to moral reasoning at higher stages than their current level of moral functioning. The resolution of the child's self-imposed disequilibrium is the restructuring of the child's moral thought at the next highest stage.

A social learning approach to moral education would concern itself with teaching children generative moral rules. Rather than teaching children to approach all moral judgmental situations in a global manner children could be taught different judgmental options that they could choose to exercise in varying situations. Thus, the goal of a social learning approach would be to provide children as much flexibility as

possible in their judgmental decision-making. This goal could be accomplished through exposure to models who employ different judgmental criteria across situations, role-playing different judgmental criteria, and exercises where children are asked to write stories or skits concerning the different options available to them in commonly experienced moral situations.

Both social learning and cognitive-developmental psychologists and educators would mutually agree that we are a long way from understanding the development of children's moral reasoning. However, as more information is gleaned from empirical research, educators will be better able to improve existing moral education strategies so that children can become true moral philosophers.

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